

DC Preservation League Review of 14th and U Streets

February 25, 2008

The DC Preservation League undertook a second review of the conceptual design for the proposed mixed use development at 14th and U Streets, NW at its February 25, 2008 meeting. Subsequent to DCPL's initial review of the project, and in response to input from HPRB, the community, and the League, Eric Colbert & Associates has significantly revised the original concept. The overall massing has been reduced by approximately 20,000 sf and the organization of the volumes substantially reworked. Most notably, the overall height has been reduced; greater setbacks have been introduced at upper floors; and the composition has been simplified to read as a lower bar element paralleling Fourteenth Street, punctuated by two vertical tower elements. In order to accomplish many of these changes, the previous stepped massing at the rear alley side has been eliminated.

The League recognizes the serious efforts made to address contextual and functional requirements, yet encourages the designers to push for greater horizontal and vertical variety in the massing. The tower elements, for example, continue to convey a strong sense of symmetry at odds with the dynamic nature of the project site. The League suggests a taller and more slender articulation of the northern tower, and a reduced volume for the central tower. If necessary, the southern portion of the bar element could be expanded further back toward the alley to provide flexibility in modeling of the primary volumes.

At the project's base, a stronger horizontal reading should be created along Fourteenth Street, relating to the primary retail function, as well as the existing and historic structures. The design as currently proposed is particularly ambiguous at the base of the northern tower, which reads as a residential element slipping down to street level. The League recommends a more clearly defined the base level here.

The League also notes that the residential entry lacks a distinguishing presence within the retail zone, and would perhaps be more appropriately located in the northern tower.

As the facades are developed in subsequent project stages, material palette and application should be carefully considered to support the major massing ideas.

Finally, the League takes note of the unresolved question of location of the garage entry (either from Fourteenth Street or the public alley). While it is open to either option and defers opinion to other reviewing parties, in either scenario it would be desirable to recognize the axis of the alley and Wallach Place in the articulation of the central tower.